

# Concepts vs. Topics

If you are having difficulty differentiating the concepts (big ideas) from the topics (content knowledge) that you teach, try the following simple “Movie Exercise.”

## Movie Exercise

This works best if completed with a small group of individuals.

1. Select a film that you and your partners have seen and can discuss. Suggestions include:
  - Wizard of Oz
  - It’s a Wonderful Life
  - Gone With the Wind
  - E.T.
2. Individually, write a concise summary explaining what the film is about. Compare with your partners and, as a group, choose a summary to represent your film.
3. Now, complete the following statement with one word:

**(Name of film): A Study in \_\_\_\_\_**

The word you placed in the blank is your concept. In other words, in one word you encapsulated what the movie was truly about, its essence, the big idea. This process is called **conceptualization**. To be successful, you have to cut through all of the details and get to the heart of it. As teachers we can do the same thing with our content. Consider the following definitions.

**Concept:** A significant idea that relates to other significant ideas in a way that can be connected to the main body of the content and can create meaning for the students in their own lives.

**Topic:** A subset of a concept, a smaller section of content that specifies the various particulars of a significant idea.

### Characteristics of Concepts

1. Generalizable-having universal applications
2. Adaptable to multiple contexts
3. Connected to other significant concepts
4. Have meaning across cultures, domains, disciplines, ways of thinking
5. Lead to larger purposes than the material itself

## Practice in Conceptualizing

*For fun, try to come up with one word concepts for the following topics. You may come up with many ideas for each.*

TOPIC	A STUDY IN
Cleaning the refrigerator	_____
Taking photographs	_____
Setting up a gradebook	_____
Planning a family vacation	_____
Outlet mall shopping	_____
Parenting	_____
Adolescence	_____
The Internet	_____

## Concepts and Topics Exercise

*See if you can distinguish between a concept and a topic. Place a “C” or “T” on each line.*

Structure	_____
Tides	_____
Root Words	_____
Human Systems	_____
Percentage	_____
Magnets	_____
Civil War	_____
Symmetry	_____
Discovery	_____

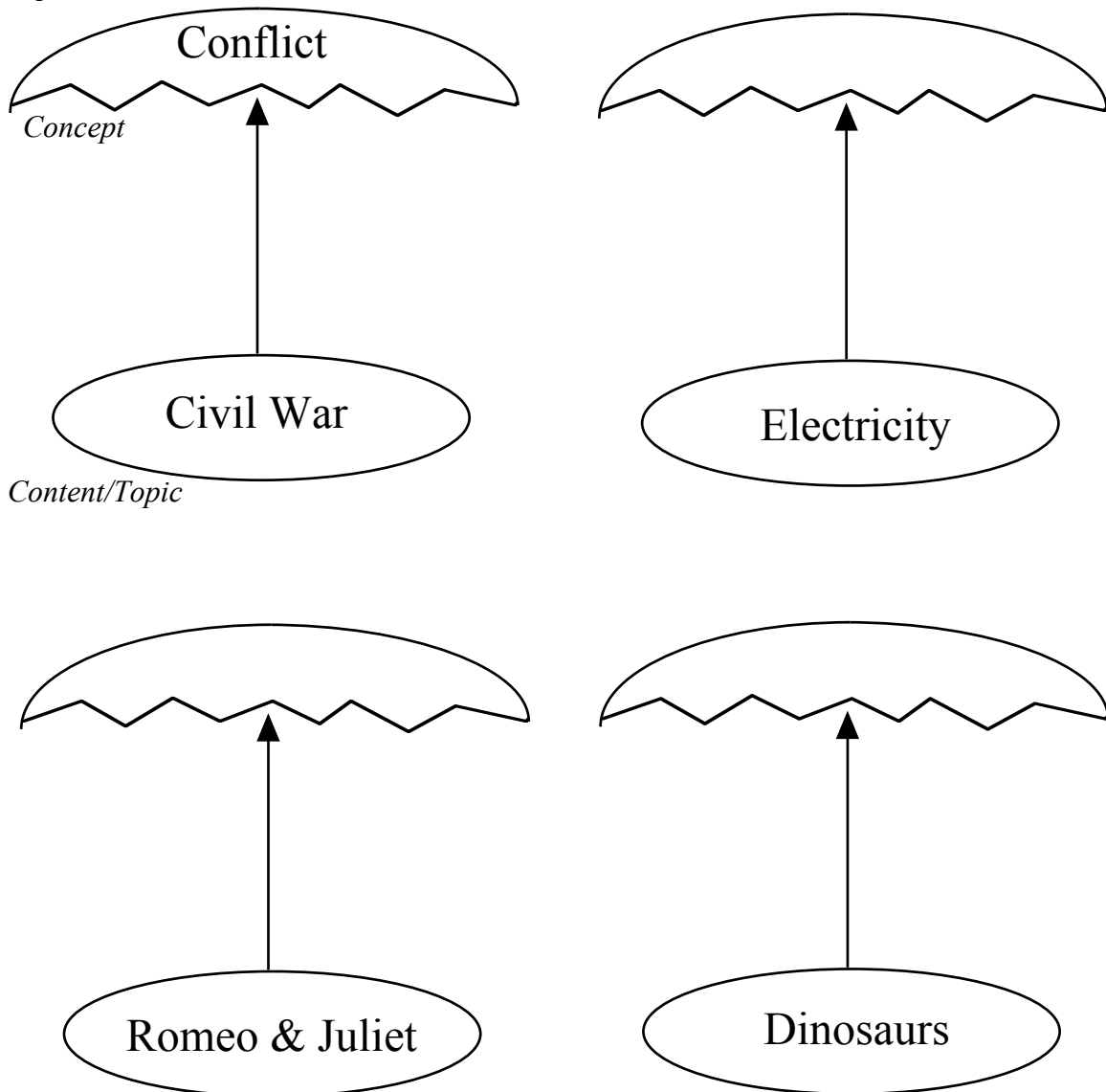
For many of these, professionals may disagree since “it depends” on their context.

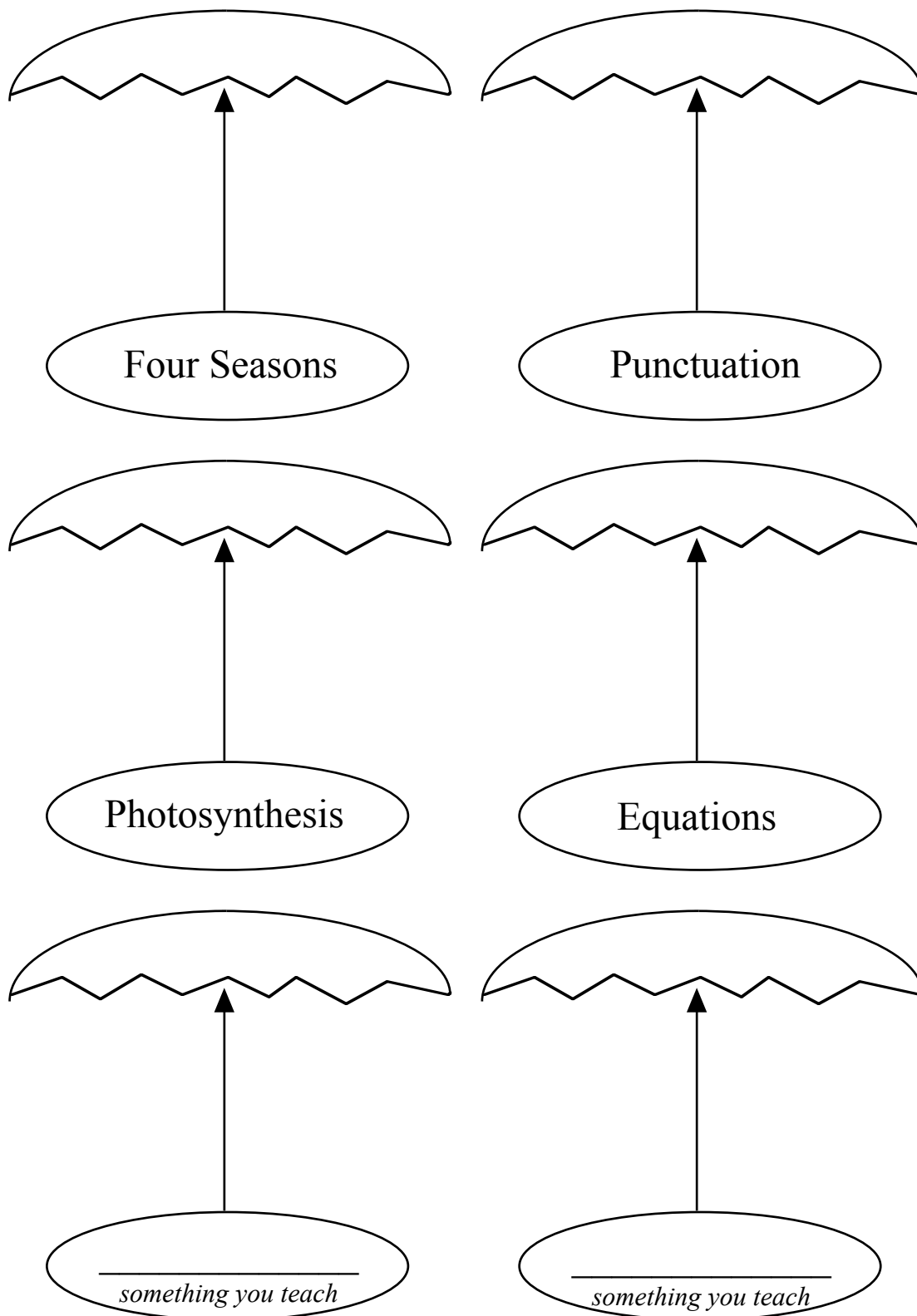
## Umbrella Exercise

One way to think of conceptualizing your content is to “umbrella” it. The bottom oval contains the content/topic and the overarching umbrella contains the concept or the bigger idea that is larger than the content. Try conceptualizing the following content, keeping in mind that many have more than one possible concept. Your context determines the one that is best for you. Use the concepts to connect to the lives of your students in a meaningful way.

Remember the equation: **[CONTENT/TOPIC]: A Study in [CONCEPT]**

Example:





One more tip: Many standards can be clustered under one concept and used in one unit of study.